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SUBJECT: KASHMIR: CHIEF MINISTER OMAR ABDULLAH'S
"CONDITIONAL" RESIGNATION

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: During a raucous Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) state assembly session on July 28, Chief Minister (CM) Omar Abdullah resigned after an opposition party member accused him of involvement in a 2006 sex scandal. Even though the Home Ministry issued a statement later that day exonerating Abdullah, he had already handed in a conditional resignation to J&K Governor N. N. Vohra in which he pledged to step down if proven guilty of the accusations. Post expects Abdullah to remain as CM, but his emotional reaction combined with prior missteps impair his ability to focus on good governance and development in J&K. END SUMMARY.

ABDULLAH,S EMOTIONAL RESIGNATION, THEN RECONSIDERATION

¶2. (U) On July 28 Deputy Leader of the Opposition Muzaffar Hussain Baig of the People,s Democratic Party (PDP) leveled allegations against J&K Chief Minister Omar Abdullah, accusing him of involvement in a three-year-old call-girl scandal under investigation. A visibly shaken Abdullah took the podium following Baig,s claims to announce that he was resigning from his office until these accusations were cleared. High drama within the state assembly ensued, as members of Abdullah,s National Conference Party (NCP) publicly begged him to reconsider his resignation. After several hours of deliberation, Abdullah appeared to have been persuaded by his confidantes to reconsider; he instead presented a conditional resignation to the Governor of Jammu and Kashmir, pledging that he will step down from office if he is proven guilty of any charges by the CBI.

THE SHOPIAN CASE AND MEHBOOBA,S DRAMATICS

¶3. (U) Abdullah,s conditional resignation unfolded one day after PDP opposition leader Mehbooba Mufti angrily threw a microphone after she was refused permission to discuss the May 29 Shopian rape and murder case on the assembly floor. The Shopian case had resulted in protests and some violence in Baramullah, Srinagar and Kupwara. Separatists hoped to channel recent incidents involving the deaths of Kashmiris into dissatisfaction with security forces and the seven-month-old Omar Abdullah government. Mufti again disrupted the assembly on July 29 when she angrily tore up a CBI letter presented on the floor by the House speaker

Mohammed Akbar Lone, which stated that there was no link between Abdullah and the 2006 sex scandal. The J&K assembly is in scheduled recess from July 30 through August 5.

BACKLASH AGAINST THE PDP

¶4. (SBU) Izhar Wani, a press correspondent in Srinagar, told Embassy staff that Governor Vohra would announce Omar Abdullah was not involved in this sex scandal and Abdullah will continue with his duties as CM. (NOTE: Governor Vohra did announce his rejection of Abdullah's resignation on July ¶30. The Congress Party's P. Chidambaram, Home Minister, publicly backed Abdullah on July 28, by saying his name does not figure in the CBI's list of the accused. END NOTE.) Wani stated that Abdullah's stature has risen amongst Kashmiris for defending his name against these accusations and that people feel that the PDP and Beig have 'played dirty politics.'

¶5. (SBU) Abdullah's supporters made their feelings public on July 30, when, according to Wani, approximately 300 NCP workers took to Srinagar's streets, shouting slogans against the PDP; they dispersed peacefully after marching from NCP headquarters to Lal Chowk, two kilometers away. Separate rallies also reportedly took place in Bandipur and Anantnag. According to both Wani and journalist Ahmed Ali Fayez, these are the first demonstrations organized by mainstream party workers in support of an existing leader of government to take place in the Kashmir Valley since the insurgency period.

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¶6. (SBU) Tahir Mohi-u-din, Editor of the weekly Chattan newspaper, believes that the PDP has not reconciled its loss of power in J&K after the 2008 state assembly elections. (NOTE: The next elections are not scheduled before 2014. END NOTE.) Highlighting the NCP's privilege motion against Baig for leveling accusations against a fellow legislator inside the assembly, Mohi-u-din predicts that if the house passes this resolution, thereby disqualifying Baig as a member, J&K will see even greater confrontational politics by the PDP.

ABDULLAH'S CREDIBILITY IN DOUBT?

¶7. (U) During a television interview on July 29, Abdullah admitted that his father Farooq Abdullah (former CM of J&K and current Minister of New and Renewable Energy) chided him after his impulsive decision to resign on July 28. Newspaper editorials depict Abdullah's hasty resignation as "emotional" and "dramatic," even a "breakdown," with calls for him to "grow up" and "square his shoulders and face situations." However, Abdullah responded that his resignation stemmed from his desire to remain credible in the eyes of the Kashmiri people.

COMMENT: ABDULLAH MUST RISE ABOVE CONFRONTATIONAL POLITICS

¶8. (SBU) Abdullah's late-2008 election was viewed as a positive generational change reflecting the beginning of post-insurgency politics. However, after initial positive reviews, Abdullah has been criticized for his inability to delegate and his political tin ear. J&K seems to have entered a summer of discontent with public discord over recent high profile crimes and a PDP grasping at straws to weaken the new government. As Omar Abdullah resumes his post as Chief Minister, he will need to resist reacting to PDP provocation and instead focus on the good governance and development pledges that got him elected. END COMMENT.
ROEMER